

# Remembering Janine Reiss, *Maître de Chant*

Anne-Marie Kenny



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ON THE SECOND DAY OF JUNE this year, when Janine Reiss passed away at the age of 99, the world of music lost a genuine *grande dame*. Janine had mentored, taught, and accompanied some of the greatest singers of the twentieth century—notably Maria Callas, Teresa Berganza, Jessye Norman, Placido Domingo, Luciano Pavarotti, Régine Crespin, and Mady Mesplé—and she worked with lesser known, ardent singers such as myself. Yet I never sensed she made such distinctions. Janine’s artistry was in service to singers and their voices, and she demonstrated a deep respect and loyalty to the composers and the texts and lyricists that inspired them. She would say, “I never prepare a singer for a conductor; I always prepare a singer for the composer.” For over thirty years I studied with Janine—on a regular schedule during my ten years in France, and later in sporadic intervals during subsequent periods when I lived in Prague another ten years and then in Omaha.

When my husband and I moved from Omaha to Paris in October of 1983, I was already a budding professional singer enamored of French music and poetry. John and I enjoyed the television program *Le Grand Échiquier*, a widely watched cultural variety show hosted by Jacques Chancel. One evening, Chancel’s premier guest was Placido Domingo. He was accompanied at the piano by someone unfamiliar to me, but with whom I was thoroughly impressed: Janine Reiss. After their performance, Chancel asked Madame Reiss to offer critique to Domingo so the viewers could see what the tenor experienced in a typical coaching session. Madame Reiss politely and assuredly obliged, and Domingo accepted her advice with eager deference. I was struck with a *coup de foudre* for this voice expert as we watched the way she offered vocal and stylistic direction to a world class opera star. I never would have dreamed that one day soon it would be I who stood at the other end of Janine’s piano receiving instruction at her home studio.

The introduction to Janine came by way of baritone Jacques Rouet d’Huart. In early 1984 Jacques and I were rehearsing for a joint classical recital scheduled for later that year in Cannes. Jacques was an outstanding young singer, so I asked him with whom he studied because I was looking for a voice teacher. A few weeks later Jacques phoned and said that he contacted his teacher, who was Janine Reiss, and she agreed to meet with me, as a favor to him, with the intention of referring me to someone else.

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Outfitted in my best dress and heels, carrying several pieces of sheet music, I arrived early and waited outside the elegant art nouveau apartment building on the rue de Courcelles. At the appointed hour, I entered a code on the outside apparatus to gain entry to the foyer and took the lift to the sixth floor. I felt my heart pounding and my hands trembling as I rang her apartment bell. A housekeeper opened the door with a warm greeting and showed me to a sitting room, stating that Madame Reiss would be in momentarily. I glanced around at the refined old world furnishings and felt transported into an aristocratic salon of the *Belle Époque*. Janine came in, and in our self introductions I found myself utilizing every formal French term of politesse that I could summon. She led me into her spacious voice studio, lined with large balcony windows on two perpendicular walls and tall plants covering some of the sky view. Her studio, which never really changed over the thirty-five subsequent years, contained a Pleyel grand piano, a settee, chairs, coffee table, book shelves crowded with opera scores and song collections, a small antique desk with chair, and walls with *nature morte* oil paintings in gilded frames. Janine had a gracious and natural manner that immediately put me at ease. She invited me to take a seat and asked about my musical background, how I came to live in Paris, and the conversation flowed. She then invited me to sing for her and accompanied me exquisitely. Janine explained that she was often out of town working on opera productions, but if I could tolerate her periodic absences, she would be pleased to work with me. Elated, I thanked her and we set our next date.

Over the years I came to know Janine professionally and personally. There were weekly lessons when both of us were in Paris. There were dinners and lunches together at each other's homes and in posh restaurants, such as Maxim's, the Paris Ritz, or the Crillon Brasserie (her favorite). The last time she and I dined together, she invited me to a small restaurant in her neighborhood. We walked there arm in arm. While our relationship was primarily professional, that of teacher and student, it also became a trusting friendship. And though much about her illustrious professional life has been written in books, articles, and television and radio interviews, in 2014 she granted me a recorded interview. I explained to her that I wanted to capture the gems of wisdom in her

teaching philosophy and someday to write about them for my students and others.

Janine's biography *La passion prédominante de Janine Reiss: La voix humaine*<sup>1</sup> recently has been written by Dominique Fournier. I enjoyed this book immensely, yet lamented to Janine of its inaccessibility to non-French readers. I was more than half serious when I offered to create the English translation, although ideally such a project should be undertaken by a skillful translator. Fournier's research was extensive. He masterfully captured Janine's artistic essence and spotlighted the amplitude of love expressed by those who knew Janine Reiss.

From early on Janine knew that her passion was to work with voices, but not her own. She would laugh when admitting that she would have pursued a singing career only if she had been given a dark timbre to sing the dramatic roles of Tosca or Carmen. But, alas, Janine was issued a high, light, and lovely soprano voice. Still, it was not uncommon for her to sing some or all of a song to give me a sense of its mood and dynamics. I cherished hearing her interpretation of the music she knew so intimately.

Janine was born in 1921. Her parents recognized her gifts at the piano when she was still quite young, and they wanted to cultivate this talent. At the age of fourteen, Janine was accepted into the venerable Schola Cantorum, a private conservatory in Paris founded by composer and teacher Vincent d'Indy before the turn of the century. Still a teenager studying at the conservatory, Janine became known as an exemplary harpsichordist and pianist. She began accompanying students at the conservatory and also at the private voice studio of Madame Forestier, who was trained by the great German singer and teacher, Lilli Lehmann. In the beginning of the '40s, Janine graduated from the Schola Cantorum and began to study privately with virtuoso pianist and composer Lazare-Lévy. Janine considered him to be her finest teacher, whom she described as an immense talent of utmost modesty and simplicity. With the Nazi occupation of Paris, forced out of his position at the Conservatory of Paris, Lazare-Lévy had to go into hiding. Janine began studying with another legendary pianist and composer, Yves Nat.

Janine's father was a philosophy professor fluent in French, English, German, and Russian, who wanted his daughter to have a broad cultural education that

included learning foreign languages. Janine became a master of her father's languages, which served her well in teaching opera roles and lyric diction.

At the end of the war, Janine married, had two sons, and put her career on hold for the first few years of family life. Around 1950, she started renewing her professional contacts and was soon hired by the chamber music orchestra of Radiodiffusion française as its harpsichordist, pianist, and *chef de chant* (vocal coach). Its productions were staged all over the city and Janine traveled abroad for them as well. This experience, combined with Janine's talent, sensibilities, and love for the human voice, placed her on the path of a remarkable career where she would be sought after by singers, composers, and conductors the world over.

One of those singers was Mady Mesplé, a soprano of consummate musicianship, who passed away only four days before the demise of her dear friend, Janine. France and the world lost two great musicians in one week. Mady Mesplé met Janine in the 1960s and is quoted as saying, "When I went to Janine's for the first time, it was a shock because I finally found what I had been looking for. She had me work my roles in precise detail, and since I am a 'detail girl' we understood each other perfectly."<sup>2</sup>

I had the good fortune to meet Mady at Janine's studio around 1986. Seeking Janine's help with an upcoming cabaret engagement at the Paris Ritz Hotel, I brought songs from Herbert Kretzmer's recently released English adaptation of *Les Misérables*, which premiered in Paris in the original French version in 1980. Janine had never heard the songs and she adored them. She asked if I would sing "Empty Chairs and Empty Tables" ("Seul dans ces tables vides") for Mady Mesplé, her next student. Mady loved them as well and thanked me profusely, but it was I who was honored to perform for Madame Mesplé.

When Rolf Liebermann became artistic director of the Paris Opera in 1973, he hired Janine Reiss to be Director of Musical Studies, a position she held until 1980. After the 1975 Paris Opera production of *Don Giovanni*, starring Ruggiero Raimondi, José Van Dam, Eda Moser, and Kiri Te Kanawa, the American film director Joseph Losey engaged Janine as musical counsel for a film version of that production, the first of many other recordings and films on which she would collaborate.

For years Janine directed the musical studies of Les Chorégies d'Orange, held every summer. One year she invited me to Orange for the opening night of Verdi's *Otello*, and we sat together in the front row of the Roman amphitheater. Post-performance, we went backstage so she could congratulate the outstanding singers, but it was they who heaped gratitude and praise onto Janine.

In 1957, the composer Francis Poulenc asked Janine to assist in preparing Denise Duval for the leading role in *Dialogue des Carmélites*. Poulenc would come to Janine's place with Duval. I still see Janine's playful smile as she recounted several stories about Poulenc. "Francis would sit here," pointing to her tiny ornate desk that she used for writing thank-you notes, cash receipts, and calendar entries, "and I would be at the piano with his freshly inked manuscript playing the parts for Denise. There were times Denise found the range far too high, and would affectionally say to Poulenc, '*Poupoule* . . . how do you expect me to sing this extremely high passage and still make the words comprehensible?'" Poulenc completely agreed and sat at Janine's desk to rewrite the passage a third lower. The following year, Poulenc returned to Janine's studio with Duval to work on *La voix humaine*.

Janine took enormous pleasure in her work with Francis Poulenc and Denise Duval—the composer with his *interprète*—and becoming part of Poulenc's creative process. There were other occasions when Poulenc asked Janine to work with him, Duval, and Pierre Bernac at Bernac's home.

World renowned conductors sought after Janine, such as Herbert von Karajan, Georges Prêtre, James Levine, Seiji Ozawa, and Pierre Boulez, to assist with productions, performances, and recordings.

In the early 1960s, Maria Callas moved to Paris and began working on *Callas à Paris*, an album of French arias under the direction of Georges Prêtre. Janine was hired to assist Callas with the repertoire. This was the beginning of an important relationship for both artists.

It is easy for me to recall the stories that Janine told about Maria Callas because she spoke of her with such love and admiration. Because of Callas's fame, Janine was often asked to recount her experiences with La Divina during television and radio interviews. In addition to Callas's extraordinary voice and dramatic abilities, Janine was particularly touched by her humility. Janine

said that Maria Callas never thought that what she did was good enough, and she constantly strove to become better. Maria told Janine that she wished the composer were present to say whether he was satisfied with her interpretation. For Janine, this attitude reaches the highest level of professionalism. Janine would become solemn and tender when she talked about the last time she saw Maria Callas before her unexpected death on September 16, 1977. As Janine told me, she and Maria were working together regularly. Normally the lessons took place at Janine's studio, but on a few occasions, like the unbeknownst final one, Janine went to Maria's apartment. When the session finished, Maria walked Janine to the door and light-heartedly chided Janine that her upcoming plans to leave town for a whole month were not very convenient! Maria said she would wait *avec impatience* for her return so Janine could help her learn the role of Charlotte in Massenet's *Werther*, which was to be recorded with orchestra under the direction of Georges Prêtre. Janine was often out of town working on productions at the world's finest opera houses. This time she was leaving for the Metropolitan Opera, at the request of its relatively new conductor James Levine. She would be working with Raymond Gibbs, Teresa Stratas, and José Van Dam in a production of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, premiering October 11, 1977. Just as Janine landed at Kennedy Airport, her luggage porter attempted small talk by inquiring if she was in the fashion industry, given the number of bags she had with her. Janine pleasantly told him that she worked in opera. The porter said that he heard on the news of a great opera singer who died by the name of Maria Callas. Janine was incredulous and said that couldn't be true; she had just seen Maria Callas three days earlier. Immediately on arriving at her hotel, Janine called James Levine who confirmed the tragic news.

In later years, Janine told me that she was displeased and saddened by the way Terrence McNally portrayed Callas in his 1995 play *Master Class*. I was embarrassed to say that I had not heard of it, and Janine said, "Just as well. It is a shameful misrepresentation of Maria's true character."

In no particular order, these are some of Janine's thoughts about working with singers, as recorded in my interviews (parts of the conversation were in French, which I have translated). She preferred the titles *Maître*

*de chant*, *Maestro di canto*, or *Professeur de rôles* to describe her work, and did not care for the term *Chef de chant* (voice coach).

- "All great singers have their own personal style, but a good technique is consistent across the board. A healthy technique is based on the breath, placement, and an intimate knowledge of the voice throughout its different registers."
- "Singers must also be accomplished musicians and proficient in reading music. In learning a new song or role, they should also study the piano and orchestral part, not just their melody line."
- "French is no harder than any other language to sing. Anyone has trouble singing a foreign language; you have to learn it. Each language is based on an overall culture, and each language elicits a special style of musical composition. I encourage singers to learn about the cultures of the languages they are singing, and to learn to speak the language accurately with its natural rhythm, intonations, and prosody. This is how to become a great interpreter of song." (Janine thought the International Phonetic Alphabet was inadequate in learning foreign languages.)
- "The French *r* should be flipped or rolled for singing French classical music, and guttural for popular French chansons. There is a new school of thought that the classics should be sung in a colloquial manner, but this is not *le bon goût* [in good taste]. Exceptions can be made for music such as Satie's cafe-concert songs."
- "Stage fright—*le trac*—is a necessary reality and it is not a good sign when a singer pretends not to have it. It is normal when stage fright happens before a performance, and then it disappears when the artist goes onto the stage and pours himself into the song."

Janine loved voices and was fascinated by them. She compared great singers to great athletes, requiring daily training, observing discipline, understanding the breath, and needing to continuously develop skill and agility. She often used metaphors to characterize the timbre of a voice. In his book *My Operatic Roles*,<sup>3</sup> Plácido Domingo writes about his role as Nadir in *Les Pêcheurs de Perles* and states that Janine Reiss says, "Italianate voices such as Domingo's or Carreras's are a bit too rich, too luscious and sensuous for the lighter, lyric French repertoire. One feels like pruning them a bit, the way you would a

rose bush. If one were to draw a parallel with colors and wines, a French voice would be reseda (pale mignonette green) rather than emerald green and a Bordeaux rather than a Burgundy.”

Janine believed that each singer has an innate quality that should be augmented as it develops, but should not be changed into something other. I learned this lesson at my first meeting with her. I had been performing at the Théâtre d’opérette de Cannes, and was studying voice with the theater’s director, Lise Palais-Martinson, sister of the conductor Jean Martinon. Madame Palais convinced me that my soprano voice had a heavier, dramatic potential. She taught me to darken the quality. At that first meeting with Janine, I presented something like “Voi lo sapete” from *Cavalleria rusticana*. Janine kindly said, “May I ask you a question: Is this how you’ve always sung?” “Not really,” I responded, “recently I’ve been working on creating a more dramatic tone.” Janine asked me to sing something with my former voice. I offered Poulenc’s “Les Chemins de l’amour” and could see Janine smiling broadly as she played for me. After her final arpeggiated chord, she burst out with, “Now *that* is your voice!”

Janine’s mentorship and friendship influenced me tremendously and illuminated what was important in art and life. While ambition, connections, and fame are necessary for a successful show business career, hard work, humility, simplicity, and respect are the stuff of artistry. Janine taught me this and so much more.

## NOTES

1. Dominique Fournier, *La passion prédominante de Janine Reiss: La voix humaine* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2013).
2. Ibid.
3. Plácido Domingo, Helena Matheopoulos, *My Operatic Roles* (Fort Worth, TX: Baskerville Publishers, Inc., 2000).

**Anne-Marie Kenny** is a voice teacher and longtime member of NATS. Over the course of twenty years, she lived in Paris, Nice, and Prague. Anne-Marie has performed cabaret shows and concerts at the Paris Ritz Hotel, Monte Carlo’s Beach Regency, Théâtre d’opérette de Cannes, Sarasota Yacht Club, Joslyn Art Museum, among others.

Private voice lessons began with Diana Morrison, a renowned soprano from the Royal Conservatory of Music at the University of Toronto, and with Mary Fitzsimmons Massie, a protégée of Mary Munchoff, who was

a protégée of Mathilde Marchesi. For the last thirty years, Anne-Marie studied with Janine Reiss in Paris and took classes at École Normale de Musique de Paris. Anne-Marie also holds a Masters of Organizational Leadership degree.

Immediately following the Velvet Revolution in 1989, Anne-Marie wrote a song for President Vaclav Havel, and he invited her to perform cabaret concerts at the famous Reduta Club in Prague. Swayed by the beauty of the city, the fertile business climate and new-found freedom of the people, Anne-Marie took a detour from music and founded a staffing and training company in Prague. She remained in Prague through the 1990s. While running her company, she gave occasional concerts, directed her church choir, and continued voice training with Janine Reiss in Paris.

After her husband passed away in Prague, she sold her company and moved back to her hometown of Omaha, Nebraska. Beginning in 2001, she resumed her career as a singer and began teaching. She started a singing group at Omaha’s largest homeless shelter and for over three years they rehearsed weekly and performed regularly all over town. She enjoys teaching students at Anne-Marie Kenny’s Vocal Performance Studio, and conducts master classes in French Lyric Diction and The Speaking Voice. [www.annemariekenny.com](http://www.annemariekenny.com)

My sorrow, when she’s here with me,  
Thinks these dark days of autumn rain  
Are beautiful as days can be;  
She loves the bare, the withered tree;  
She walks the sodden pasture lane.

Her pleasure will not let me stay.  
She talks and I am fain to list:  
She’s glad the birds are gone away,  
She’s glad her simple worsted grey  
Is silver now with clinging mist.

The desolate, deserted trees,  
The faded earth, the heavy sky,  
The beauties she so truly sees,  
She thinks I have no eye for these,  
And vexes me for reason why.

Not yesterday I learned to know  
The love of bare November days  
Before the coming of the snow,  
But it were vain to tell her so,  
And they are better for her praise.

“My November Guest,” Robert Frost